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SUBJECT: MEETING THE MORCHIDAT

REF: RABAT 990

Classified By: Pol/C Timothy Lenderking for reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (SBU) Following a flurry of misleading press reports indicating that the recently graduated female Islamic guides (morchidat) would be comparable to male imams, the Moroccan Council of Ulemas issued a fatwa on May 26 confirming Minister of Islamic Affairs' Ahmed Toufiq's statement that indeed these women would not be leading prayers in the mosques (reftel). Poloff met with Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs Regional Representative for the Rabat/Sale region Ahmed Kostas and two of the new graduates of the training program on May 31 to get their perspective on the new program.

¶2. (SBU) Recent morchidat graduates Samira Marzouk and Khadija Aktami are both in their early thirties and married. Samira completed her university studies in Arabic literature while Khadija majored in economics. After college, Samira taught in an informal education program in orphanages and shelters. Khadija began a masters' program, but then got married, had a child, stayed home and memorized the Koran. They said that their classmates were similarly diverse in terms of university studies and interests. Both women were enthusiastic about the comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach taken in the training program with studies ranging from the sharia, sciences, history, sociology, psychology, human rights, international events, communications, computer training, and languages. Samira noted the importance of being familiar with all of these issues when dealing with people on a day-to-day basis.

Jobs and Postings

¶3. (SBU) Both women have been posted to mosques in Rabat - Khadija who was number four in her class to a posh mosque in a rich neighborhood and Samira who was thirty-first in the class of fifty to a mosque in a lower-class neighborhood. They explained that the process of being posted consisted of making their desires known and then meshing those desires with their class rank. While they both knew their postings, they have not actually yet begun their duties, and instead they are continuing to complete the paperwork and medical examinations necessary to become a Moroccan civil servant. As new Ministry employees, they will sign contracts (generally eight years long) and be paid "like a university professor." As they do not yet have offices in the mosques to which they are assigned, they come regularly to the regional office to process paperwork.

¶4. (SBU) The women were uncertain as to when they would be starting their new jobs, but understood that in addition to teaching and providing advice, they would also be responsible for many administrative duties at the mosque possibly to

include maintenance, vocational training, and computer systems. Both of the women insisted that there would be no real difference in the duties between the imams and the mouchidat with the sole exception of leading prayers. The duties of both imams and mouchidat include explaining the Koran, the hadith and the sunna to their congregations and giving religious advice. Samira emphasized the importance of getting the correct Islamic message across any way possible, whether in mosques, hospitals, prisons or schools. The new Ministry initiative to install televisions in mosques could also provide a "non-traditional" avenue for better instruction. Likewise, the Ministry's website, radio and television stations could serve as means to convey the message.

¶15. (SBU) Both women said they had chosen what they consider will be a life-long "career" of mouchidat after having a great interest in Islam from childhood. They had wanted to be Waidats (female Islamic tutors) which still exist in the mosques, but the new training program had given them another option with similar, but expanded responsibilities. Their families strongly support their choice to become mouchidat

International Experience

¶16. (SBU) The two both guessed that none of their 200 colleagues had ever traveled outside of Morocco (note: most of the graduates come from lower-income families). They both indicated that they would appreciate opportunities to do so as they considered it better to have direct contact with another culture and not blindly accept stereotypes. Samira told of a journey she made in which she had to take two different buses to go to a gathering where she had heard that Americans would be present as she was eager to interact with

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them. Indeed, even during their program, the trainees' contact with foreigners was limited to the select few who came to lecture for the King's Ramadan lecture series. The women noted, however, that France had recently asked the Ministry to provide ten of the newly trained imams to serve in French mosques. These new imams (not mouchidat) would be selected through an examination process for this much-sought-after posting.

¶17. (SBU) When asked about the heightened press interest in their story, the mouchidat noted that it had been a little "exaggerated" and too focused on the story of the women. The only issue the journalists seemed to be interested in was whether the women would be allowed to lead prayers in the mosques. They did not seem to care about what the mouchidat would actually be doing. While the journalists may have good intentions in spreading their story, it was important to focus on other issues as well such as the development of the country.

Combating Extremism

¶18. (SBU) Even though there are approximately 33,000 mosques in Morocco, the two hundred newly trained graduates are a good start in the process of replacing old imams, according to Kostas, as the areas where the imams and mouchidat are being posted have been specially targeted by the Ministry as needing a moderating influence. As a result, there will be thirteen posted in the Rabat/Sale region including several in the four or five "extremist" mosques in Sale. The imams currently working in these mosques will remain in place as "honorary" imams occasionally performing the Friday prayers, but the new imams will take over most of their duties. The newly trained imams will "have a program to follow" and "will be watched" closely by the Ministry, according to Kostas.

Comment

¶19. (C) Despite several attempts, this is our first contact with the newly-minted mouchidat. Apparently, the

international press frenzy caught the Ministry off guard, making them hesitant to allow interactions with the new graduates. Kostas explained that all of the recent attention to the program is "good and bad," as it is sometimes better to "let the seeds take root and grow before showering them with water" (and in this case attention). As the new crop of imams and morchidat began training on May 15, post will continue to follow their progress and their impact on the process of Islamic reform in Morocco.

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